

PHILIP STEELE

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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"THE HONOR OF THE BIG SNOWS," &c.

CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

"Something happened last night," he said, looking straight ahead of him, "that I can't understand. I didn't tell my wife. I haven't told any one. But I guess you ought to know. It's interesting, anyway—and has made a wreck of my nerves." He wiped his face with a blackened rag which he drew from his hip pocket. "We were working hard to get out the living, leaving the dead where they were for a time, and I had crawled under the wreck of the sleeper. I was sure that I had heard a cry, and crawled in among the debris, showing a lantern ahead of me. About where berth No. 10, so should have been, the timbers had telescoped upward, leaving an open space four or five feet high. I was on my hands and knees, bareheaded, and my lantern lighted up things as plain as day. At first I saw nothing, and was listening again for the cry when I felt something soft and light sweeping down over me, and I looked up. Heaven's—"

Billinger was mopping his face again, leaving streaks of charcoal where the perspiration had started.

"Finned up there in the mass of twisted steel and broken wood was a woman," he went on. "She was the most beautiful thing I have ever looked upon. Her arms were reaching down to me; her face was turned a little to one side, but still looking at me—and all but her face and part of her arms was smothered in a mass of red-gold hair that fell down to my shoulders. I could have sworn that she was alive. Her lips were red, and I thought for a moment that she was going to speak to me. I could have sworn, too, that there was color in her face, but it must have been something in the lantern light and the red-gold of her hair, for when I spoke, and then reached up, she was cold."

Billinger shivered and urged his horse into a faster gait.

"I went out and helped with the injured then. I guess it must have been two hours later when I returned to take out her body. But the place where I had seen her was empty. She was gone. At first I thought that some of the others had carried her out, and I looked among the dead and injured. She was not among them. I searched again when day came, with the same result. No one has seen her. She has completely disappeared—and with the exception of my shanty there isn't a house within ten miles of here where she could have been taken. What do you make of it, Steele?"

"Perhaps you didn't return to the right place," he suggested. "Her body may still be in the wreck."

Billinger glanced toward him with a nervous laugh.

"But it was the right place," he said. "She had evidently not gone to bed, and was dressed when I returned. I found a part of her skirt in the debris above. A heavy tress of her hair had caught around a steel ribbing, and it was cut off! Some one had been there during my absence and had taken the body. I'm almost ready to believe that I was mistaken, and that she was alive. I found nothing there, nothing that could prove her death."

"Is it possible?" began Philip, holding out the handkerchief.

"It was not necessary for him to finish. Billinger understood, and nodded his head."

"That's what I'm thinking," he said. "Is it possible? What in God's name would they want of her, unless—"

"Unless she was alive," added Philip. "Unless one or more of the scoundrels searching for valuables in there during the excitement, saw her and carried her off with their other booty. It's up to you, Billinger!"

Billinger had reached inside his shirt, and now he drew forth a small paper parcel.

"I don't know why—but I kept the tress of hair," he said. "See—"

From between his fingers, as he turned toward Philip, there streamed out a long silken tress that shone a mellow gold in the sun, and in that same instant there fell from Philip's lips a cry such as Billinger had not heard, even from the lips of the wounded; and before he could recover from his astonishment, he had leaned over and snatched the golden tress from him, and sat in his saddle staring at it like a madman.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Girl in the Wreck.

IN that moment of terrible shock—in the one moment when it seemed to him as though no other woman in the world could have worn that golden tress of hair, Billinger, Philip had stopped his horse, and his face had gone as white as death. With a tremendous effort he recovered himself, and saw Billinger staring at him as though the hot sun had for an instant blinded him of reason. But the look of hair still rippled before his eyes. Only twice in his life could he remember having seen hair just like this—that peculiar reddish gold that changed its lights with every passing cloud. He had seen it on Isabel, in the freight of the camp, at Lac Bain—and he had seen it crowning the beautiful head of the girl back home, the girl of the hyacinth letter. He struggled to calm himself under the questioning gaze of Billinger's eyes. He laughed, wound the hair carefully about his fingers, and put it in his coat pocket.

"You—you have given me a shock," he said, straining to keep his voice even. "I'm glad you had foresight enough to keep the lock of hair, Billinger. At first—I jumped to a conclusion. But there's only one chance in a hundred that I'm right. If I should be right—I know the girl. Do you understand—why it startled me? Now for the chase, Billinger. Lead away!"

Leaning low over their saddles they galloped into the North. For a time the trail of the five outlaws was so distinct that they rode at a speed which lathered their horses. Then the short prairie grass, crisp and sun-dried, gave place to a broad sweep of wire grass above which the yellow backs of coyotes were visible as now and then they bobbed up in their quick, short leaps to look over the top of it. In this brown sea all trace of the trail was lost from the saddle and both men dismounted. Foot by foot they followed the faint signs ahead of them, while over their backs the sun rose higher and began to burn with the dry furnace-like heat that had scorched the prairie. So slow was their progress that after a time Billinger straightened himself with a nervous curse. The perspiration was running in dirty streaks down his face. Before he had spoken Philip read the fear that was in his eyes and tried to hide the reflection

of it in his own. It was too hot to amble, but he drew forth a case of cigarettes and offered one to Billinger. The agent accepted one, and both lighted in silence, eyeing each other over their matches.

"Won't do," said Billinger, spitting on his match before tossing it among the grass. "It's ten miles across this wire-dip, and we won't make it until night—if we make it at all. I've got an idea. You're a better trailer than I am, so you follow this through. I'll ride on and see if I can pick up the trail somewhere in the edge of the clean prairie. What do you say?"

"Good!" said Philip. "I believe you can do it."

Billinger leaped into his saddle and was off at a gallop. Philip was almost eagerly anxious for this opportunity, and scarcely had the other gone when he drew the linen handkerchief and the crumpled lock of hair from his pocket and held them in his hand as he looked after the agent. Then, slowly, he raised the handkerchief to his face. For a full minute he stood with the dainty fabric pressed to his lips and nose. Back there—when he had first held the handkerchief—he thought that he imagined. But now he was sure. Faintly the bit of soiled fabric breathed to him the sweet scent of hyacinth. His eyes shone in an eager bloodshot glare as he watched Billinger disappear over a roll in the prairie a mile away.

"Making a fool of yourself again," he muttered, again winding the golden hair about his fingers. "There are other women in the world who use hyacinth besides her. And there are other women with red-gold hair—and pretty, pretty as Billinger says she was, aren't there?"

He laughed, but there was something uneasy and unnatural in the laugh. In spite of his efforts to argue the absurdity of his thoughts, he could feel that he was trembling in every nerve of his body. And twice—three times he held the handkerchief to his face before he reached the rise in the prairie over which Billinger had disappeared. The agent had been gone an hour when the trail of the outlaws brought him to the knoll. From the top of it Philip looked over the prairie to the North.

A horseman was galloping toward him. He knew that it was Billinger, and stood up in his stirrups so that the other would see him. Half a mile away the agent stopped and Philip could see him signaling frantically with both arms. Five minutes later Philip rode up to him. Billinger's horse was half-winded, and in Billinger's face there were tense lines of excitement.

"There's some one out on the prairie," he called, as Philip reined in. "I couldn't make out a horse, but there's a man in the trail beyond the second ridge. I believe they've stopped to rather their horses and feed at a little lake just this side of the rough country."

Billinger had loosened his carbine, and was examining the breach. He glanced anxiously at Philip's empty saddlestraps.

"It'll be long-range shooting, if they've got guns," he said. "Sorry I couldn't find a gun for you."

Philip drew one of his two long-barreled service revolvers and set his lips in a grim and reassuring smile as he followed the bobbing head of a coyote some distance away.

"We're not considered proficient in the service unless we can make use of these things at 200 yards, Billinger," he replied, replacing the weapon in its holster. "If it's a running fight I'd rather have 'em than a carbine. It isn't a running fight we'll come in close."

Philip looked at the agent as they galloped side by side through the long grass, and Billinger looked at him. In the face of each there was something which gave the other assurance. For the first time since Philip had left his companion at Black Horse Station. He was a fighter. He was a man of the stamp needed down at Headquarters, and he was bound to tell him so before this affair was over. He was thinking of it when they came to the second ridge.

Five miles to the north and west loomed the black line of the Bad Lands. To a tenderfoot they would not have appeared to be more than a mile distant. Midway in the prairie between there loomed a human figure. Even at that distance Philip and Billinger could see that it was moving, though with a slowness that puzzled them. For several minutes they stood breathing their horses, their eyes glued on the object ahead of them. Twice in a space of a hundred yards it seemed to stumble and fall. The second time that it rose Philip knew that it was standing motionless. Then it disappeared again. He stared until the rolling heat waves of the blistered prairie stung his eyes. The object did not rise. Blinking, he looked at Billinger, and through the sweat and grime of the other's face he saw the question that was on his own lips. Without a word they spurred down the slope, and after a time Billinger swept to the

right and Philip to the left, each with his eyes searching the low prairie grass. The agent saw the thing first, still a hundred yards to his right. He was off his horse when Philip whirled at his shout and galloped across to him.

"It's her—the girl I found in the wreck," he said. Something seemed to be choking him. His neck muscles twitched and his long, lean fingers were digging into his own flesh.

In an instant Philip was on his feet. He saw nothing of the girl's face, hidden under a mass of hair in which the sun burned like golden fire. He saw nothing but the crumpled, lifeless form, smothered under the shaming mass, and yet in this moment he knew. With a fierce cry he dropped upon his knees and drew away the girl's hair until her lovely face lay revealed to him in terrible pallor and stillness, and as Billinger stood there, tense and staring, he caught that face close to his breast, and began talking to it as though he had gone mad.

"Isobel—Isobel—Isobel—" he moaned. "My God, my Isobel—"

He had repeated the name a hundred times, when Billinger, who began to understand, put his hand on Philip's shoulder and gave him his water canteen.

"She's not dead, man," he said, as Philip's red eyes glared up at him. "Here—water."

"My God—it's strange," almost moaned Philip. "Billinger—you understand—she's going to be my wife—if she lives."

That was all of the story he told, but Billinger knew what those few words meant.

"She's going to live," he said. "See—there's color coming back into her face—she's breathing. He washed her face in water, and placed the canteen to her lips."

A moment later Philip bent down and kissed her. "Isobel—my sweetheart—" he whispered.

"We must hurry with her to the water hole," said Billinger, laying a sympathetic hand on Philip's shoulder. "It's the sun. Thank God, nothing has happened to her, Steele. It's the sun—this terrible heat—"

He almost pulled Philip to his feet, and when he had mounted Billinger lifted the girl very gently and gave her to him.

Then, with the agent leading in the trail of the outlaws, they set off at a walk through the sickening sun-glare for the water hole in the edge of the Bad Lands.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Battle in the Canyon.

Hunched over, with Isobel's head sheltered against his breast, Philip rode a dozen paces behind the agent. It seemed as if the sun had suddenly burst in molten fire upon the back of his neck, and for a time it made him dizzy. His bridle reins hung loosely over the pommel. He made no effort to guide his horse, which followed after Billinger's.

It was Billinger who brought him back to himself. The agent waited for him, and when he swung over in one stirrup to look at the girl it was the animal ferocity in his face, and not his words, that aroused Philip.

"She's coming to," he said, straining to keep the tremble out of his voice. "I don't believe she's much hurt. You take this canteen. I'm going ahead."

He gave Philip the water and leaned over again to gaze into the girl's face. "I don't believe she's much hurt," he repeated, in a hoarse, dry whisper. "You can leave her at the water hole just beyond that hill off there—and then you can follow me."

Philip clutched the girl tighter to him as the agent rode off. He saw the first faint flush returning into her cheeks, the reddening of her lips, the gentle tremor of her silken lashes, and forgetful of all else but her, he moaned her name, cried out his love for her, again and again, even as her eyes opened and she stared up into the face of the man who had come to her first at Lac Bain, and who had fought for her here. For a breath or two the wonder of this thing that was happening held her speechless and still lifeless, though her senses were adjusting themselves with lightning swiftness. At first Philip had not seen her open eyes, and he believed that she did not hear the words of love he whispered in her hair. When he raised her face a little from his breast she was looking at him with all the sweet sanity in the world.

A moment there was silence—a silence of even the breath in Philip's body, the beating of his heart. His arms loosened a little. He drew himself up rigid, and the girl lifted her head a trifle, so that their eyes met squarely, and a world of question and understanding passed between them in an instant. As swift as morning glow a flush mounted into Isobel's face, then ebbed as swiftly, and Philip cried: "You were hurt—hurt back there in the wreck."

But you're safe now. The train was wrecked by outlaws. We came out after them, and I—I found you—back there on the prairie. You're safe now."

His arms tightened about her again. "You're all right now," he repeated gently. He was not conscious of the sobbing break in his voice, or of the great, throbbing love that it breathed to her. He tried to speak calmly. "There's nothing wrong—nothing. The heat made you sick. But you're all right now—"

From beyond the hill there came a sound that made him break off with a sudden, quick breath. It was the sharp, stinging report of Billinger's carbine! Once, twice, three times—and then there followed more distant shots!

"He's come up with them!" he cried. "The fury of desire for vengeance, blazed anew in his face. There was pain in the grin of his arm about the girl. "Do you feel strong—strong enough to ride fast?" he asked. "There's only one man with me, and there are five of them. It's murder to let him fight it alone."

"Yes—yes," whispered the girl, her arms tightening round him. "Ride fast, or put me off. I can follow—"

It was the first time that he had heard her voice since that last evening up at Lac Bain, many months before, and the sound of it thrilled him.

"Hold tight!" he breathed.

Like the wind they swept across the prairie and up the slope of the hill. At the top Philip reined in. Three or four hundred yards distant lay a thick clump of poplar trees and a thousand yards beyond that the first black escarpments of the Bad Lands. In the space between a horseman was galloping fiercely to the west. It was not Billinger. With a quick movement Philip slipped the girl to the ground, and when she sprang a step back, looking up at him in white terror, he had whipped out one of his big service revolvers.

"There's a little lake over there among those trees," he said. "Wait there—until I come back!"

He raced down the slope—not to cut off the flying horseman—but toward the clump of poplars. It was Billinger he was thinking of now. The agent fired three shots. There had followed other shots, not Billinger's, and after that his carbine had remained silent. Billinger was among the poplars. He was hurt or dead.

A well-worn trail, beaten down by transient rangers, cut through the stunted growth of prairie timber, and without checking his speed Philip sped along it, only his head and shoulders and his big revolver showing over his horse's ears.

A hundred paces and the timber gave place to a sandy dip, in the center of which was the water hole. The dip was not more than an acre in extent. Up to his knees in the hole was Billinger's riderless horse, and a little way up on the sand was Billinger, doubled over on his hands and knees beside two black objects that Philip knew were men, stretched out like the dead back in the wreck of the water hole. The dip was which was the water hole. The dip was not more than an acre in extent. Up to his knees in the hole was Billinger's riderless horse, and a little way up on the sand was Billinger, doubled over on his hands and knees beside two black objects that Philip knew were men, stretched out like the dead back in the wreck of the water hole. The dip was which was the water hole. The dip was not more than an acre in extent. 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